

THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Its Significance to Negroes and Jews

by

JAMES H. HUBERT

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NEW YORK URBAN LEAGUE

Price: Twenty-five cents



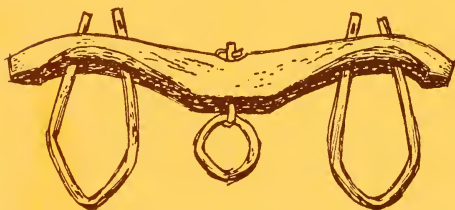
1939

WENDELL MALLIET AND COMPANY

New York, N. Y.

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AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE
GAD LODGE, NO. 11, FREE SONS
OF ISRAEL, FEBRUARY 15, 1939

by

JAMES H. HUBERT

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NEW YORK URBAN LEAGUE

With an Introduction by

DR. WILLIAM HEARD KILPATRICK

Professor Emeritus of Education, Columbia University

AND AN EXTRACT FROM THE PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
ON THE TEST OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY DELIVERED
BEFORE THE SIXTY-FIFTH ANNUAL SESSION OF
THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF SOCIAL WORK

by

DR. SOLOMON LOWENSTEIN

Executive Director, Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies



1939

WENDELL MALLIET AND COMPANY

New York, N. Y.

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Printed in the United States of America by Theo. Gaus' Sons, Inc., New York

978.7L23
374202

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1939

G A D L O D G E, No. 11

Free Sons of Israel

M. Coleman Harris, M.D., President
133 East 58th Street, New York

February 16, 1939.

James H. Hubert, Executive Director
New York Urban League, Incorporated,
202-6 West 136th Street,
New York City.

Dear Mr. Hubert;


It was a great joy and pleasure to have you as the guest of Gad Lodge last evening. Your address was one of the finest of its kind, I have ever had the pleasure of listening to, and I want here and now to express my deep thanks and appreciation for your gracious contribution to the evening's program.

I trust I may have the pleasure of seeing and meeting you again in the very near future. Meanwhile I send you sincere and hearty greetings.

Faithfully yours,

/s/ M. Coleman Harris, M.D.

MCH:D.C.



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INTRODUCTION

THE AUTHOR of this address on Abraham Lincoln stands, with others of his family, in peculiar relationship with me because of the relationship between his father and my father and of what has grown out of that relationship.

When the eldest brother of James H. Hubert was approaching manhood, his parents, Zack and Camilla Hubert, were uncertain what to do for him. They appealed to my father; he advised sending him to college. They did. Seldom has one step been more fruitful.

Some years ago there came to my office at Columbia University one who said, "You do not know me, my name is Hubert." My immediate reply was, "I know who you are. I knew your father and his brother." He then told me that he was president of the Oklahoma State University (for Negroes), that a brother held the analogous post in Georgia, that another was a minister in Atlanta, still another was head in Savannah of the largest public high school for Negroes in the world, the fifth brother (the author of this address) was director of the New York Urban League, while two younger brothers were (then) still in school.

If Abraham Lincoln were now living and could see the record of this one family and what they have done for the good of their people and of our common country, he would

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speaking forth as I do now in hearty appreciation. It is a pleasure here to honor thus publicly, first, the man and his wife who starting at the very bottom made this worthy contribution to America. It is a pleasure to honor this their worthy son who, along with his brothers, has so well carried forward the work begun by their parents. The record is an example to us all. For myself I glory in it. May the future yet show more of it.

WILLIAM HEARD KILPATRICK

*Professor Emeritus of Education,
Columbia University*

New York, N. Y.

April 23, 1939.

THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Its Significance to Negroes and Jews

MR. PRESIDENT AND MEMBERS OF THE GAD LODGE, I appreciate the honor of joining with you in your commemoration of the birth of Abraham Lincoln.

I have been asked to discuss "The Life of Abraham Lincoln—Its Significance to Negroes and Jews." I recognize full well that in inviting me you do so, not so much because of my personal ability to interpret the life and work of Abraham Lincoln, as out of recognition and appreciation of the ideals and objectives of the Urban League Movement—an organization established for the purpose of cultivating inter-racial goodwill, and securing for the submerged tenth of our nation—that group to which Lincoln devoted so much of his energy and thought—larger social and economic opportunity.

I wish to pay tribute to the aid and sympathetic understanding that we as Negroes have had at the hands of your group, and voice my personal appreciation of that splendid demonstration of self-help—of organized charity at its best—that has served as a stimulating ideal not only for Negroes, but for other racial and religious groups as well.

Abraham Lincoln's life ran the whole gamut of American society. He hoisted himself by his own boot-straps. He had less than a year's formal schooling, all told, and was practically

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self-educated from the sparse books of the frontier Illinois country. Born into the "poor white trash" of the Southern backwoods, he was a pioneer of the first order—frontiersman, champion fodder-puller, and flatboatman, cockpit umpire, saloon keeper, merchant, surveyor, and country lawyer. Lincoln rail-split, wrestled, and wise-cracked his way into law practice at New Salem, Illinois. He became the leading lawyer and politician, the acknowledged head, and the champion orator of the political period in his state; he was legislator, congressman, statesman and President; he was leader in the most remarkable war of modern times—the tallest figure of the nineteenth century—he was the liberator of a race and martyr to the life of his country. Abraham Lincoln was the first President of the United States who was characteristically and typically American. In him all men—high and low—found their common denominator.

The life of Abraham Lincoln should be an inspiration, a guiding star of hope to boys of your race and mine. It says, "You may climb from the bottom to the top; no citizen is so low that he may not aspire even to the Presidency of these United States."

It is well that we call attention to some of Lincoln's distinguishing characteristics. When he was criticized by his fellow-workers for reading law during his leisure hours as a rail-splitter, his reply was, "I'll get ready; perhaps my chance will come." Preparation for emergencies that might arise, pervaded by optimism, was always in evidence. His philosophy was simple, and his illustrations so clearly stated as not only to be understood, but in such a manner as not to be misunderstood. When, for instance, asked how long a man's

leg should be, he replied, "Long enough to reach the ground." In seeing a Negro girl sold into slavery for the first time, he expressed his repulsion to slavery, and his determination, by saying, "If ever I get a chance to hit that thing, I'll hit it hard." He had an abiding sense of humor, as evidenced in his various conferences. When Horace Greeley was discussing the Emancipation Proclamation, and there seemed need for a softening note he said, "Greeley, did you ever notice that the stripe in your trousers is almost the same as mine?" When a group of ministers called at the White House in despair, saying, "We are beginning to question whether God is on our side," Lincoln replied, "I have never doubted God. My only aim is to be on God's side. My chief concern just now, however, is over Kentucky and the Border States." (Kentucky and the Border States were at that time in the balance and were threatening to lend their support to the Confederacy.) Lincoln was always persistent in his aim. Said he, "If I can save the Union by freeing the slaves, I would do so. If I could save the Union without freeing the slaves I would do so. But my paramount object is to save the Union." He understood human nature; had a rare ability in making allowances for shortcomings and for evaluating, as well as appreciating one's strong points. When McClelland showed disrespect to his chief, Lincoln's reply was, "I'll hold that fellow's horses, if only he will bring me victory." When complaint came that General Grant drank liquor, he answered, "Try and find out what kind of whiskey Grant uses. I'd like to get some for my other generals." When he heard that Hooker had said, "What this country needs is a dictator," his reply

was, "Victory generally precedes dictatorship. If Hooker will bring me victory, I will risk the dictatorship."

Lincoln was no ordinary individual. Gurdjieff divides all men into two classes. One he calls Ordinary Individuals, the other Conscious. They differ, he says, only in the persistence of their aims. The ordinary man either has no aim, or maintains it only for a short duration. The conscious individual never lets go. His aim permeates his entire life. Eventually the aim gets possession of him to such an extent that the individual is lost in the aim. And in this transformation, we achieve the immortal. These are the men to whom we build monuments, whose lives we commemorate, whose ideals we seek to perpetuate and pass on to generations unborn.

The need for emphasizing principles such as those for which Lincoln stood—for finding a common denominator of racial minorities—was never more apparent. Strange as it may seem, there are many Negroes who believe that a large number of Jewish people do not wish to be identified with them, or to be thought of as having a common problem. I find that many Negroes are influenced in their opinion by the attitude and action of perhaps one Jew. They will say, "He did me a dirty deal—took undue advantage of me." Just as in some parts of the South, if a Negro snatches a white woman's pocket-book, all Negroes are branded as thieves henceforth and forever. These attitudes persist, notwithstanding the fact that perhaps no racial minority in America has ever evidenced greater interest in the Negro's common problem than have the Jews. For instance, no story of the Negroes' progress in America would be complete without mention of Julius Rosenwald, and the contributions he made to their educational, social and

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economic welfare. Thousands of other Jews have given financial support and encouragement by helping to build our Young Men's and Young Women's Associations, our Urban Leagues, and to carry education to the darkest corners of the Southland, where in many places the Negro child's chance to receive an education prior to the establishment of the Rosenwald schools ranged from nothing to about 1 to 10, as compared with the white child. (Booker T. Washington used to say that in his opinion it was entirely too high a compliment to pay to the intelligence of the black child to expect it to do as much with one dollar as the white child did with \$10.) The Negro has always known what it means to have school doors slammed in his face, as is now being done to Jews in Germany. That in spite of these handicaps he has made and is making his contributions to the economic and cultural life of America is a tribute not only to him but to our democratic form of government.

Well may we ask, has the Negro justified Lincoln's efforts and hopes? When the proclamation was issued, there were about four million Negroes in America. Today that number has increased to more than thirteen million. The Negro arrived late on the scene. He began in the basement—perhaps I should say in the cellar—for certainly he was at the lowest rung of the human ladder. He has struggled against overwhelming odds to make a place for himself, and now when his fellow Europeans are being driven from their homes, he is willing to move back and share a portion of that space—however small—to those whose economic security is even less than his. Negroes do sympathize with the Jews in their present plight. Negroes are ready to identify themselves with the Jews in their suf-

fering. We not only recognize our duty in a common cause, but we realize full well that what the Jews now suffer is but a slight indication of what we too will suffer if those enemies of democracy are allowed to continue in their aggressive program of persecution.

The Negro has made his contribution to America not only in the Arts, in Music and Song, but he has contributed to the building of America. Our great staple crops—rice, cotton and tobacco—have depended largely upon him for their cultivation. A recent trip South convinced me that in George Washington Carver of Tuskegee Institute, the South has perhaps one of its greatest benefactors. Carver, through his scientific discovery, has made it possible not only for Negro farmers, but also for white farmers of the South to substitute peanuts, potatoes and other crops for cotton, since its growth has been imperilled by the spread of the boll weevil, and the disappearance of foreign markets has made its production no longer justifiable. Yet Carver is not socially acceptable to the white South or to America, for that matter. He is not welcome on a Pullman car, and would experience difficulty even in entering a soda fountain to quench his thirst.

It is significant to remember that the Negro has not been acceptable except in extreme emergencies. Bitter and intense as was the struggle to save the Union, it is well to recall that it was not until defeat was threatening the Union forces—not until the disastrous defeat at Bull Run—that some Union forces were willing to accept the aid of Negro soldiers. And even then Lincoln found it hard to get Negroes into the government uniform. White soldiers wanted Negroes to be dressed in a suit different from their own.

In a letter to James C. Conkling of Springfield, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln said in his answer to northern critics of the Emancipation Proclamation: "I know that some of the commanders of our armies in the field, who have given us our most important victories, believe the emancipation policy and the aid of colored troops constitute the heaviest blows yet dealt to the rebellion, and that at least one of those important successes could not have been achieved when it was, but for the aid of black soldiers. I submit their opinion as being entitled to some weight against the objection often urged that emancipation and arming the blacks are unwise as military measures, and were not adopted as such in good faith.

"You say you will not fight to free Negroes. Some of them seem willing to fight for you—but no matter. Fight you then exclusively to save the Union. I issued the proclamation on purpose to aid you in saving the Union; if I shall urge you to continue fighting, it will be an apt time for you to declare that you will not fight to free Negroes. I thought that, in your struggle for the Union, to whatever extent the Negroes should cease helping the enemy, to that extent it weakened the enemy in his resistance to you? Do you think differently? I thought that whatever Negroes can be got to do as soldiers leaves just so much less for white soldiers to do in saving the Union. Does it appear otherwise to you? But Negroes like other people act upon motives. Why should they do anything for us if we will do nothing for them? If they stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motive, even the promise of freedom. And that promise being made must be kept." In his tribute to the Negro soldiers he said that

but for the aid of the 200,000 black men he doubted that the war could have been won.

Distress, poverty and famine, are in themselves great common denominators. It took famine to make the prodigal son come to himself.

In Europe today the doctrine of race superiority has been revealed in all its brutal nakedness. Perhaps we should thank God, not only for the good things of life, but for those operations of his Satanic majesty which help to bring us to ourselves. Certainly the racial minorities, the so-called backward peoples of the earth, have now had driven home to them the fact that in union there is strength. That a house divided against itself cannot stand was the theme of Lincoln's fight for a democracy—a government of the people, for the people, and by the people.

Democracy must be striven for and constantly protected against insidious foes. Americanism is not a mere catchword that can be shouted out by anyone. It can be used just as well as the last refuge of the scoundrel as in the interest of truth, liberty and justice. Those who study Lincoln most closely know that he was no chauvinistic flag-waver. The reason that he lives today and still inspires so many men everywhere with the will to shake off their chains and find freedom and opportunity in the brotherhood of life is that he was essentially a *citizen of the world*. In a letter from the White House he wrote: "The strongest bond of human sympathy, outside of the family relation, should be one uniting all working people of all nations, and tongues, and kindreds." In his recorded speeches and letters, from his earliest frontier days, he spoke not as a representative of any one community, any

one faith or class, but as a member of the whole race. He was forever conscious of the obligation of all Americans to their brethren in all other lands—to the liberal party throughout the world—to make the democratic spirit live and grow.

The democratic heritage is in terrible peril in the world today. Faced by foes without and within, it needs all the encouragement, all the inspiration, all the understanding that can be provided for it. Every one fighting for democracy, whether in Spain or China or New Jersey or Texas, is our friend, and every enemy, whether he be a Hague destroying civil liberties or a Coughlin spewing forth racial hate, is our enemy. If we are content to wave a flag and cry out that America is wonderful, we are rendering scant service to democracy, for there is every bit as good a chance that we are supplying cover for the foes of our heritage as that we are cheering on our friends.

Out of slavery the Negro gained forbearance, fortitude, and the ability to endure hardship. His literature effervesces with joy in the midst of adversity, contentment, adaptation, yet always voices a challenge and sane protest against the wrongs which oppress him. It bespeaks his marvelous intelligence, his strategic cleverness in playing a "bust hand". His ability to evaluate his hand and to make the most of a bad deal from which there seems no possible escape will always be one of America's strange romances.

This rare contribution of the Negro to the cultural life of America has never been adequately appraised. Many sophisticated Negroes today ridicule what they call the "surrender" of the slave who finding himself bound in a helpless position cried out in the depths of despair, "You may take all the world,

but give me Jesus!" A true interpretation of this attitude reveals an element of profound wisdom. We know that the Negro did not, in his soul, submit to the injustices of slavery. He recognized that it was not humanly possible for him to get possession of this world's goods under the institution of slavery, and so he only abandoned, temporarily, to his white master that which he already possessed. It was the wisdom of the fox, who, realizing that the grapes hung beyond his reach, sought to vindicate his impotence by denouncing them as sour. This apparent surrender—this seeming rejection or refusal to glorify or wax enthusiastic over material things—was not mere whistling in the dark. It was choosing "the better part." He was saying, "Life is more than meat." For, to the Negro slaves, the term "Jesus" was symbolic. It was, of course, a protective philosophy. It was also another way of saying, "Bar if you must the path to wealth and economic power, but keep open the door of hope to the soul."

It is not to be interpreted as a repudiation of, nor as inability to appreciate, the physical comfort that might accrue from the possession of material wealth.

Out of this rare and rich background has come to America and to the world, a harvest of literature and art, finding its highest expression in the Negro Spiritual. Negro Folk songs are charged with hope, faith, and optimism that harbor no defeat—a faith triumphant over fears.

Count Keyserling, when asked what he regarded as America's greatest contribution to world culture, answered, "Negro music." In all of the spirituals there is no trace of malice, vindictiveness, rebellion, hate or resentment. In spite of the oppressive yoke of slavery out of which these spirituals

came, there is a lack of vengeance against the oppressor. This spirit is portrayed in *The Green Pastures*, where the children coming out of Egypt, dust-laden and footsore, break forth in song, "Lord, I Don't Feel No Ways Tired."

When Lincoln in his Gettysburg address said, "With malice toward none, and with charity for all," he seemed to have embodied the same idea that motivated the Negro spiritual. For although the Negro sang, "Nobody knows the Troubles I See," he always ended with that triumphant note, "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah."

Much emphasis has been given to securing for the Negro his adequate share of this or that. What, really, does the Negro ask? Is it merely an opportunity to work; to eat in a restaurant; to ride in a pullman car; to sit in a theatre; to rent or buy a home in a respectable neighborhood? These are, of course, some of the material things that he craves. But he is asking for more than that. He asks the privilege of bringing his gifts to the altar—of playing his full role in the building of America along with other races and nationalities. He stands at the Threshold—not as one to be "kept down" or "in his place"—not as one to be "helped up," or asking, "what will you give me?" He asks rather, "What may I do for you?" He asks in no spirit of bitterness for an acceptance not only of his labor and his song, his philosophy of life, but of all that he has been storing up through the ages in the hope that it may help to enrich the lives of other races.

The same note of optimism permeates the literature of our present day writers. Langston Hughes, in one of his poems, has said:

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I, too, sing America
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes.
But I laugh,
Eat well
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed,—
I, too, am America.

We would do well in these times to re-read the prophecy of Israel Zangwill.

"America is God's crucible," says he, "the great melting pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming. Here you stand—God's folk think I when I see them at Ellis Island, with your fifty lan-

guages, hatreds and rivalries; but you won't be long like that, brothers, for these are the fires of God. you have come to—these are the fires of God!

“A fig for your feuds and vendettas. Germans, Frenchmen, Irishmen, and Englishmen, Jews and Russians. Into the crucible with you all. God is making the Americans! The real American has not yet arrived. He is only in the crucible, I tell you. He will be the fusion of all races—the common superman.”

This new social order will come if we, in the words of the immortal Lincoln, are sincerely determined that “It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us; that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.”

ADDRESS OF DR. SOLOMON LOWENSTEIN

*Extracts from Presidential Address of Dr. Solomon Lowenstein,
Executive Director Federation for the Support of Jewish
Philanthropic Societies on THE TEST OF AMERICAN
DEMOCRACY before the Sixty-fifth Annual Session,
National Conference of Social Work.*

“THE GREAT BLOT on our record has been the treatment of the Negro. Originally brought here into slavery, a great war was necessary to give him his freedom. Given his freedom, he became the object of industrial exploitation and social discrimination. His position in many parts of the South has been, if possible, even more than that of the German Jew of today, because the latter, at least until recently and for many years, has had the advantage of education and of participation as an equal in German life. While the German-Jewish position today is becoming one of constantly increasing deterioration, the position of the American Negro is beginning to show signs of amelioration. For the South, where he resides in the largest numbers, he is becoming an ever increasing industrial need. He supplies a large part of the labor needed for the development of southern industry. Because of his threat as a competitor, southern white labor has learned that inferior conditions for the southern Negro mean increasing exploitation of itself. Through the intervention of

philanthropic and other funds, the condition of Negro education is constantly improving. Negroes have schools, though not adequate or in many regions competent, from the primary grades to the university. The latter are turning out teachers and leaders. Negro culture has a right to boast of musicians, of writers, and of scientists of repute and increasing distinction. Negro businessmen and professional men are becoming more numerous, remaining in the South to share their talents with their lowly brethren and to do everything possible to improve the condition of the latter. In the North, where Negro populations are growing in number, they suffer from many disadvantages. Their housing, their education, their medical conditions, their recreational opportunities are all more restricted and less desirable than those of their white neighbors; but here, too, their industrial value and the fact that they are not subject to legal discrimination in schools or other public enterprises are leading to a gradual but general improvement in their condition.

“American democracy must be conscious of this real problem. True as it was before the Civil War that this nation could not survive half-free and half-slave, so is it true of us, as of any other nation that pretends to equality and freedom of opportunity, that there cannot be in our midst a class, a group, or a people against whom there is exercised conscious and deliberate discrimination. This has been the worst failure in our democratic theory, and it is to be hoped that we are about to see in the comparatively near future the end of this injustice and cruelty.”





